

Interview

MUSIC

DISCOVERY: HIGH WATER

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High Water (a.k.a. Will Epstein) creates sonic pools that listeners want to dive into. Although the New York native's background is in saxophone and improvisational jazz, Epstein possesses an uncanny finesse with a folksy piano melody. When paired with his chameleonic vocals—at times little more than a whisper, at others an authoritative howl—it's clear that his debut LP, *Crush* (which was released July 1 via Nicolas Jaar's label Other People) marks the arrival of an exciting new solo talent.

It comes as no surprise that Epstein cites John Coltrane, John Zorn, Bob Dylan, and Lucinda Williams (whom he covered with a captivating rendition of "Changed the Locks") as major personal influences. But with electronic trills, loops, and distortions of genre akin to Jaar's *Darkside*, or that act's other half, Dave Harrington (who lends his talents to six *Crush* tracks), Epstein is very much an artist of the Computer Age. For evidence, look no further than the music video for his single "Bad Touch," which we're pleased to premiere exclusively below.

We recently spoke with the Epstein about his early influences, psychedelic schemes, and the electronic musician as a painter.

NAME: Will Epstein

AGE: 26

HOMETOWN: New York, NY



EARLY BEGINNINGS: I started playing the saxophone when I was about eight years old. That was my first instrument; it's been in me for a long time. I started singing and writing songs, I'd say, about five or six years ago. Before that, I was just doing instrumental music, mostly improvising and playing the saxophone. The stuff had been brewing in me for a while, but I think that's about when High Water started. It is kind of strange. It really felt like it had to come out of me for some reason. I don't really know why. I had a band, a different band at the time, and wasn't singing at all, and then just sort of started screaming and kind of hollering. It was like a birth or something.

SEEDS PLANTED: I'm kind of an obsessive person. In high school, I listened to pretty much only John Coltrane for about three and a half years. I was super obsessive and would just get really deep on it. When I was even younger, I listened to The Rolling Stones a ton and was dancing like Mick [Jagger]. I think one of my first performances was performing "Sympathy for the Devil" a cappella for my middle school. It's hard to believe that I did that. [laughs] I listened to a lot of jazz, and I listened to a lot of Bob Dylan. John Coltrane and Bob Dylan are two of my favorites—maybe top one, top two favorite musicians. And they have very similar spirits to me in a certain way. There's a lot of searching in both of their music. There's a rigidity and aloofness, and I think that kind of interplay is something that I really like a lot.

"BAD TOUCH" AND SPELLS: What I really like about it is that it's trance-like in a certain way. I think that song and a lot of my songs on this album, particularly, are like incantations or spells or something. This video hypnotizes you in the same way that the music feels to me. They were kind of spells that I was writing for myself to get me through life. To me, the video is extremely complementary to that in that it has a very intense rhythm to it and it also has a psychedelic quality to it that allows it to seep into your brain in a new and exiting way—that's what I liked about it.

FILL YOUR MIND: It's hard to say how it is for other people's experience with it, but I certainly want for the music and for anything that I put out there to have something new about it. When your brain gets a little twisted is when you're able to feel certain things that you are maybe pushing away or don't readily confront in yourself. I think that's what the word "psychedelic" means to me in general—it's like opening a chasm in your mind and filling it with these emotions. That's what I want to do; I want to get into the deep part of you that either you push out yourself or the world pushes out, you know?

SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN: A lot of [my Other People labelmates] are very close friends of mine. Nico, who runs the label, has been one of my best friends since right around when I started playing music. Dave Harrington, who plays on my record is someone that I collaborate with a lot. I was just playing in his band on tour in Europe. I just got back two days ago. I think we're a community because we care about these things and care about similar stuff—that's what makes the music. Belief is what makes things strong. I'm striving to believe as hard as I can. Without that, there's really nothing. Having a community that believes is what's important, and that's what's most important to me—being around people who really believe. I'm lucky that they believe in similar things."

THE STUDIO GRIND: For most of the process, it's just me. For all the songs on this record, I started by writing on my Fender Rhodes keyboard. These are my most full-fledged songs with fully written lyrics and stuff, so I was really honing my craft and learning how to do that at the same time. But I think because of how I started playing music, improvising and especially playing with other people, collaboration is definitely very important to me. The final step was going into the studio with Nico

who then produced the record. I brought in a bag of sound and we assembled it in these songs in his studio.

THE COMPUTER AGE: It's not calculated like a math equation or something; it's simply me trying to be honest about this stuff, the music that I like. I see music very imagistically and as having a lot of different colors. I think very much in that way and Nico does as well. So each sound to me is a different color, and what's exciting about the recording process is what the computer has allowed musicians to do—it has turned them more into painters, to an extent. It's allowed us to craft paintings in a certain way, or sculptures.

PLAYING LIVE: I think what I liked about starting with these bare bones songs and this raw material is that you're able to—in the same way that we were talking about painting and filling in the colors—do whatever you want with [the song]. I like doing a lot of different things to my songs. I just had these release shows a couple weeks ago, and I did it chamber style with just Dave [Harrington] playing guitar and his electronics and I was mostly doing keyboard and singing and playing some sax. It was a more stripped-down thing. I do it in a bunch of different ways. Right now, I'm getting my solo act together. When I play with musicians, I only play with people who I really love everything that they do, and I want them to be themselves when they're playing with me. That's really important to me. My goal is to take the songs and explore them and open them up and let them breathe and find new air.